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Carbon-fibre-reinforced SMC for multi-axially reinforced components

5 The invention relates to an SMC for producing fibre-reinforced thermosetting components, a corresponding production process and a component produced from this SMC.

10 SMC stands for "Sheet Moulding Compound" and is a resin mat according to DIN 16913. In general, SMC refers to a flowable resin mat based on unsaturated polyester resin or vinyl ester resin and random fibre distribution in the plane of the mat. The reinforcing fibres customarily used are glass fibres. A typical SMC formulation  
15 consists of about 30% of polymer, about 30% of filler and about 30% of glass fibres, the remainder being composed of additives, such as, for example, colouring pigments, hardeners, dispersing auxiliaries, fillers and similar materials. SMC is generally produced as follows:  
20 the resin matrix is applied to two carrier films. These carrier films are drawn through an SMC machine and in the process transport the resin matrix, onto which the reinforcing fibres are sprinkled or laid. Once the reinforcing fibres have been deposited, the two films  
25 are pressed together to produce a kind of sandwich. This sandwich is transported through an impregnating section, which uses pushing and rocking movements to ensure that the fibres are uniformly wetted with the resin matrix. At the end of the machine, it is wound onto reels. Of  
30 crucial importance is a ripening process, which may be initiated by chemical and/or physical means. After this ripening process, the SMC can be further processed. After stripping off of the carrier foils, the SMC is customarily processed or pressed in heated steel moulds  
35 to form shaped parts.

The advantage of SMC is the high flowability, which has the effect that only 30 to 50% of the pressing mould has to be covered. The strength and stiffness can be varied in a wide range, depending on the reinforcing-fibre content.

As an alternative, it is known to place a woven fabric in the resin matrix for reinforcement. The disadvantage of this is that, although the strength is substantially increased, there is hardly any flowability. The pressing mould must be completely covered, which requires exact cutting to size, resulting in a lot of waste.

Furthermore, SMC with a glass-fibre reinforcement comprising both cut fibres (random fibres) and unidirectional fibres (UD fibres) is known. The UD fibres produce increased strength and stiffness properties in an axial direction and the random fibres determine the transverse strength. This SMC is preferably employed only for support-type components, such as, for example, bumper supports. It is not possible to produce sheet-like components because of the high tendency of the components to become distorted.

The object on which the invention is based is to develop an SMC for producing fibre-reinforced thermosetting components according to the preamble such that a high strength and stiffness in a multi-axial direction is achieved in sheet-like thin-walled components. The basis for this is an SMC with an asymmetrical fibre structure, comprising a random fibre side and a UD fibre side.

According to the invention, this object is achieved in that several layers of SMC containing UD fibres with a different axial alignment from one another are arranged

in the component. Since the UD fibres govern the strength and stiffness properties, these properties are not only provided in an axial direction but in different directions. Owing to the high strength and stiffness, it is possible to produce lightweight components or ones with a thin wall structure.

In order to be able to produce a multi-layer SMC structure with desired component wall thicknesses of about 1.2 mm and large SMC as cut dimensions, the SMC weight per unit area must be less than 1000 g/m<sup>2</sup>.

Until now, it has not been possible either to produce such low SMC weights per unit area industrially, or effectively from the point of view of strength and stiffness. The development of such an SMC has become interesting only with a UD carbon-fibre reinforcement and the resulting strength and stiffness properties for a multi-axial reinforcement in the component.

In comparison with the customary process techniques for the production of components from fibre composites with carbon fibres (resin transfer moulding, prepreg processing by the pressing or autoclave process), the SMC on which the invention is based has the following advantages:

- Simple as cut geometries, since despite UD fibre reinforcement the SMC is flowable
- No SMC clippings which have to be disposed of or recycled
- No trimming of the shaped parts, therefore no waste

- Short cycle times of the component production, therefore suitable for mass production.

5 A combination of random fibres formed of glass or carbon fibres with UD carbon fibres is preferred for the asymmetrically reinforced SMC which has been developed.

10 The SMC on which the invention is based covers 60 - 95% of the pressing mould. In order to produce the flowability of the UD carbon fibres in the UD direction, the continuous UD fibres are cut to a finite length. The finite UD fibre lengths may be between 25 mm and 650 mm. The ends of the finite UD fibres are offset from one another in order to avoid weak points in the SMC.

15 In a preferred embodiment, the UD fibre lengths are carbon fibre tows, for example produced by the "heavy tow" process. It is advantageous to use carbon fibres greater than 49 K for this purpose. Alternatively, broad-strip carbon fibre tows produced by the "heavy tow" process in widths of 10 mm to 500 mm can be used.

25 To check the UD fibre directions in the finished shaped part by X-ray inspection, individual glass fibre yarns are introduced into the matrix in the direction of the UD fibres as contrast fibres.

30 To improve the fibre wetting, the flowability and to compensate for shrinkage, a different resin matrix is advantageously used for the random fibres and the UD fibres.

35 It is advantageous to introduce conductive additives into the resin matrix, in order to improve the electrical conductivity to such a degree that an

electrostatic (ESTA) coating is possible without an additional conductive primer on the component.

5 The surface resistance should be between 10 and  $10^6 \Omega$  at 5 V and the volume resistance be less than  $10^5 \Omega/\text{cm}$ .

10 A process according to the invention for producing a fibre-reinforced SMC having the above-mentioned properties is distinguished in that SMC mats with random fibres and a single layer of UD fibres are produced and in that a plurality of such SMC mats is arranged, prior to further processing to form the shaped part, with multi-axial alignment of the UD fibres by building up into a stack. This has the great advantage that an  
15 existing installation for producing an SMC comprising random fibres and UD fibres does not have to be altered. The multi-axial alignment is brought about by the building up of individual SMC mats into a stack, the SMC mats being stacked so as to be rotated relative to one  
20 another.

In a preferred embodiment, all the UD fibre layers used are aligned in the  $0^\circ$  direction and any desired number of fibre layers are used.

25 In an alternative preferred embodiment, at least four UD fibre layers are arranged in the following alignment:

$0^\circ, 90^\circ, 90^\circ, 0^\circ$  or  $0^\circ, 90^\circ, 0^\circ, 90^\circ$ .

30 The angles indicate that the next UD fibre layer below is arranged so as to be rotated by this angle relative to the first layer.

This means that the first layer is aligned at  $0^\circ$  and the second layer at  $90^\circ$  relative to the first layer.

5 In an alternative preferred embodiment, at least six UD fibre layers are arranged. In this case, the UD fibre layers expediently have the following alignment:

$0^\circ, 90^\circ; +45^\circ, -45^\circ, 90^\circ, 0^\circ.$

10 In an alternative embodiment, eight UD fibre layers are arranged with the following alignment:

$0^\circ, 90^\circ; +45^\circ, -45^\circ, +45^\circ, -45^\circ, 90^\circ, 0^\circ.$

15 For greater wall thicknesses, the material structure can be laid from multiples of 4 or 6 or 8 layers in the specified order one above the other.

20 A preferred embodiment of the process provides that the SMC mats (with one UD fibre layer) are cut into strips and wound onto spools, that the strips for the component production are cut to length and arranged in any desired position and the individual blank layers are built up into a stack in any desired angular position relative to  
25 one another on a rotary table. This has the advantage that even geometrically difficult blank shapes do not produce any waste.

30 As the final operation, the stack is either placed in the tool (press) for producing the component and the component is pressed or else, as an intermediate stage, is preshaped by prepressing for the purpose of securing, the press for preshaping being an inverse form of the mould for producing the component.

Preferably, the strips are wound onto spools with a core diameter of greater than or equal to 200 mm and an outside diameter of greater than or equal to 500 mm.

- 5     The SMC and processing technology according to the invention is versatile. It is preferably used to produce fibre-reinforced components, in particular for the automotive industry.
- 10    Components can be produced for a wide variety of applications, depending on the resin matrix. Interior and exterior parts joined together result in high strengths and stiffnesses in body elements, for example.
- 15    When using a non-shrinking resin matrix, it is possible to produce exterior parts of motor vehicles with a "class A" surface which, because of their electrical conductivity, can be electrostatically coated like sheet-metal parts.
- 20    Further features of the invention will become apparent from the figures which are described below and in which:
- 25    Fig. 1     shows, schematically, an installation for producing SMC with one UD fibre layer,
- 30    Fig. 2     shows, schematically, an apparatus for producing the blank layers and the multi-axial SMC,
- 35    Fig. 3     shows, schematically, the production of the blank layers and the building up into a stack on a rotary table,
- Fig. 4     shows the pressing to form a shaped part,

Fig. 5 shows, by way of example, a built up stack of individual UD fibre layers,

Fig. 6 shows a finished shaped part with a schematic arrangement of the original UD fibre layers, and

Fig. 7 shows the multi-axial alignment of the UD fibre layers.

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Fig. 1 shows a machine or installation for producing SMC with a single UD-fibre layer. A resin paste or resin matrix 2 is applied to a film 1 using a doctor blade 3. Random fibres 4 are then sprinkled on. These random fibres 4 are glass fibres or carbon fibres, which are supplied as continuous fibres 5 to a cutting device 6 and are cut by the latter into small pieces of about 6 - 50 mm in length. Unidirectional UD fibres 7 are then laid on in the direction of travel of the web. These UD fibres 7 are preferably carbon fibres. Finally, a second film 1 is again coated with a resin matrix 2 using a doctor blade 3 and is laid onto the first film, resulting in a kind of sandwich. The subsequent impregnation in a chamber between honeycombs or honeycombs and binders, which may be arranged in a heating chamber, is not shown. This SMC thus produced is, according to the invention, cut on-line or off-line into strips of about 4 - 20 cm in width and wound onto reels.

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Fig. 2 shows, schematically, the subsequent procedure. The reels 8 just mentioned are arranged offset in succession. Only two reels 8 are depicted here, by way of example. A film stripper 9 is arranged beside each of the reels 8. To produce the multi-axial SMC, the SMC is

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cut to length by a cutting tool 10 and displaced,  
resulting in a blank layer 11 of virtually any shape  
without clipping. The reference numeral 12 denotes the  
individual strips after cutting and before displacement.  
5 The displacement takes place on a conveying device 13.  
The individual layers 11 cut to size are then either  
built up into a stack with different axial alignment of  
the UD fibres on a rotary table 14 or else fixed  
directly by prepressing. The press 15 for preshaping is  
10 advantageously an inverse form of the mould for  
producing the shaped part.

Fig. 3 shows, schematically, the production of the blank  
layers 11 and the building up into a stack on a rotary  
15 table 14. The individual reels 8 are cut, according to  
requirements, and displaced to form a blank layer 11 and  
then stacked on a rotary table 14. This procedure does  
not produce any waste or clippings.

20 Fig. 4 shows the pressing to form a shaped part 16. A  
stack of built-up blank layers has been preshaped in a  
preshaping press 17. This preshaping press 17 is then  
placed together with the preshaped part into the press  
18, the preshaping press is then withdrawn and the  
25 shaped part 16 is pressed.

Fig. 5 shows, by way of example, a built-up stack 19 of  
individual blank layers 11. In this example, the stack  
19 consists of six layers with an orientation of the UD  
30 fibre layers of  $0^\circ$ ,  $90^\circ$ ,  $+45^\circ$ ,  $-45^\circ$ ,  $90^\circ$ ,  $0^\circ$ .

Fig. 6 shows a finished component (shaped part) 16 with  
a schematic arrangement of the individual UD fibre  
layers. The building up of the individual cut to size  
35 layers 11 can be clearly seen.

Fig. 7 shows the multi-axial alignment of the UD fibre layers at  $0^\circ$ ,  $90^\circ$ ,  $+45^\circ$ ,  $-45^\circ$ ,  $90^\circ$ ,  $0^\circ$ .